



CRITICAL RACE AND WHITENESS STUDIES JOURNAL

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Keeping On

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The argument here will be two-fold. First is that we are in a moment in which calibrating pessimism and optimism — and therefore of balancing the pull of repeating older arguments versus a pressure to make leaps — has become notoriously difficult. However, and secondly, with regard to the particulars of continuing to spread (especially Indigenous Australian) critical race theory and whiteness studies ideas the case for doing so seems overwhelming and even quickened by the so-called “dark times” that the editorial prompt evokes.

Antonio Gramsci’s famous dicta urging maintaining of “optimism of the will” while practicing “pessimism of the intellect” help us in today’s universities only so far. He spoke, in his own dire conditions, as a revolutionary and he speaks to us as revolutionaries, as knowledge producers but not as producers of academic knowledge. I hear Gramsci’s wisdom reprised often in emails and on blogs, especially from radical scholars about my advancing age. As Trump wins, as xeno-variants of Brexit dominate British politics, as Australia shames itself in brutalizing both newcomers and its First Nations, as South Africa weeps, as left and “pink” experiments in Latin America are punished, and as the planet broils, the impulse to affirm that the struggle continues along more or less the same lines has its reassuring appeals. Still I’m not sure sometimes if the goal of optimistic posts is to buoy the spirits of young people or the writers themselves.

So, it refreshing to read the prompt’s implicit endorsement of pessimism as a perfectly legitimate response to our moments of danger. The appeals to pessimism made by the British left collective and journal *Salvage* have likewise breathed some fresh air into radical thought. It is true in the U.S. that the boomlet in enthusiasm for at least the word socialism has given rise to a kind of fragile political optimism among some young people, and the Corbyn presence in Britain more so, reaching into *Salvage* itself. The very hard issue of climate change leads both towards clear-eyed catastrophism requiring new thoughts and actions and to a renewed need for hope that the existing system can somehow respond and give the planet a few further decades.

Even within universities the unspeakably anti-intellectual and deeply conservative impulses of neoliberal knowledge production yield both radical disgust and renewed

commitments. For those with job security some opportunities to find niches where work seems oppositional exist in higher education institutions that perhaps accept and perfect market logics more now than any other industry. Indeed, the editorial on the Journal's new initiative, bluntly pitiless as it is on the crisis of the university, might at least in the U.S. need to underline a further source of gloom and complication. That is, because the small U.S. left does train people to answer emails and because some corners of the neoliberal university are devoted to diversity and even to direct aid of students from oppressed groups, the terrible academic status quo is run to some limited extent by administrators we work[ed] with in movements.

So, pessimism persuades me and it is right to begin by acknowledging that what we have done – in my case particularly what we in the “60s generations” have done – has been utterly inadequate to the task and certainly does not license our endless repetitions of the lessons our struggles taught. However, there are some caveats to be entered both regarding teaching and organizing around race generally and regarding the value of the particular wisdom generated by critical race and whiteness studies coming from Australia. It is first worth observing that no academic knowledge can realistically task itself with saving the world. We try, we contribute, we support and look for movements, but the yardstick cannot be whether academic knowledge production can set things right. It can't.

Secondly there's a particular way in which university-based knowledge producers need to remind themselves of the **virtues** of repetition. Academic star systems and promotions toward job security do not just reward conformity. They reward conformity coupled with an ersatz pose of originality and quirkiness, especially valued if reducible to soundbite or tweet. Increasingly the ideal of neoliberal knowledge production is to be newsy. To do the same work spun in different directions is an indictment in much of academia. And yet where racial oppression is concerned, repetition of basic truths, and increasing the angles from which they can be learned, remains absolutely critical. In the U.S., for example, we regularly lull ourselves into imagining that everybody at least knows that race is socially constructed. Then like clockwork someone from Harvard publishes a book refurbishing the measuring of skulls and it fast becomes the latest thing. We do not need hubris, but we do need repetition for the benefit of students and of the public.

Finally, the particular truths and challenges developed in Australia by critical race and whiteness studies seem especially worth repeating and elaborating in light of current crises. It is in Australia and New Zealand that the critical study of whiteness has been most decisively forwarded within universities by scholars from groups most directly victimized by whiteness. Not surprisingly this fact has animated some of the most searching analyses of the “white problem.” As a nation without African slavery Australia also challenges fundamentally core assumptions of much (North) American work on whiteness. The latter often centers slave labor and the African other as the keys to possessive investments in being white. The result is the near exclusion of ways in which claims, made in the service of dispossession, to an ability to “husband” and manage land also decisively mattered. More tentatively, I would also argue that Australian scholars have been more ready and able to puzzle over the specifics of anti-immigrant whiteness and the ways in which appeals to so-called “nativism” whistle towards white hatreds aimed at long-standing racialized populations. The brilliant ways in which Aileen Moreton-Robinson takes possession to combine the material and the cultural position us to think, for example, of “dark times” as also times of a whiteness that loves possession far more than planet.

Author Note

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